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The Washington Color School--of which the paintings from the Melzac collection are exponents--is part of post-World War II American Modernism that found expression in large canvases filled with color and non-representational shapes. In even broader terms, however, its lineage goes back at least to the mid- and second half of 19th century Europe, especially France, when a number of factors served to set art in a direction radically different from the representational, objectified art of past centuries. Among these factors were:

--the industrial revolution, creating a middle class that not only changed the nature of art patronage (from the court and the church to the urban dweller, often in mercantile or civil service professions), but also the very subject matter of art (away from grand historical, mythological, or religious narratives to a depiction of specific, even mundane moments in contemporary time and place, as seen in the Impressionists);

--scientific and technological developments, as in the science of optics--which examined the passage of light and its impact on the human eye, and photography--which, while it initially appeared to be a threat to painting, in time came to be seen as a liberating force, freeing the artist from the traditional role of recorder to one of explorer;

--philosophy, reaching back as far as Aristotle, for whom color was "flaved light, a tragic necessity between divine radiance and stygian darkness," on to the late 19th century mystical and occult movements, with their attendant claims of colors as symbols, examining the myth and art of past--including non-European--cultures;

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--and finally the development of Freudian and Jungian phychology, which, in its conscious examination of the dream world state and production of new, biomorphic images, was a major factor in the development of Surrealism.

It is important to recall that the notion of painting being affected by factors apparently extraneous to itself is nothing new in the tradition of western art: the Dutch oil paintings of the 17th century, for example, intended generally for domestic use and developed under the watchful eye of an ever-powerful mercantile class that espoused the tenets of the Reformation, are in stark contrast to the elaborate and emotional frescoes in Italian churches of the same time period that promoted the cause of the Counter-Reformation. This was art with an agenda!

In examining the works of the Washington Color School, then, it is important to view them relative to their milieu, especially to the work of the related New York-based Abstract Expressionists, the "gesture" or "action" painters, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem deKooning. The intellectual matrix of both groups is the philosophy of Existentialism, developed partly as a reaction against the ideologies--and their accompanying art styles--of the 1930s which, following the devastation of World War II, were seen as morally and philosophically bankrupt. The existentially-minded artist avoided subjecting himself to fixed ideas, patterns, or standards. If, in addition, one accepts the premise that, in art there are two main impulses--one aiming at the direct creation of universal beauty (the classical spirit, also seen in the geometric

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abstraction of Piet Mondrian, the Russian Constructivists, or the Bauhaus), the other at the aesthetic expression of oneself (the romantic spirit, prevalent in much of 19th and early 20th century American art)--then the American painting vanguard of the 1940s moved decidedly toward the latter, culminating in the emergence of Abstract Expressionism. It is a highly subjective and personal art, based in part on European Surrealism and the theory of "automatic draving," exploring psychic depths in order to discover fresh images; the Americans used this theory to reveal what they saw to be universal myths that "lived" in the collective unconscious, manifested in the movement's "unfinished" forms and dynamic brush strokes: the oft-described "gesture." In addition, the Abstract Expressionists were influenced by the 18th century English philosopher Edmund Burke, whose passages on the nature of the sublime (1757) led them to seek "the effect of infinity" in large, simple areas of color that inundate the eye. An understanding of optics led to the awareness that the sought-after sense of boundlessness is further intensified when the areas of color are close in value, evenly painted, and not delineated, as in the works of Mark Rothko, thereby continuing an uninterrupted progression into the field of color. To further augment the sensation of an enveloping color, the color field painters worked on an ever-larger scale--as large as the reach of the painter...and then some, suppressing all literal references in the process. (Some art critics maintain that the grand scale is actually evocative of the vast American landscape, calling to mind the large 19th century landscapes by Albert Bierstadt.) The paintings of the Abstract Expressionists come to impress one "as possessing the qualities not so much

3. I can tighten the section on the abstract expressionists if necessary.

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of things as of impulses, of excited movements, emerging and changing before our eyes."

The younger artists who emerged in the milieu of Abstract Expressionism in the mid to late 1950s adopted the Existentialist rhetoric but not necessarily its basically romantic spirit. Indeed, they worked against the current of Abstract Expressionism, moving to more openness of design and image, toward a clarity that distinguished them from the compressed space and the frantic brush expression of the action painters. This is evident in the work of the Washington D.C. painter, Morris Louis, whose emotive floving lines of color suppress the tactile sensations so apparent in the action painters. In Louis and others of this trend, the personal is suppressed in order to achieve a purity of form and color. This purist position in art espouses an "art for art's sake" aesthetic, aiming to purge art of literary subject matter, representation, and illusionism--all of which are produced in the pictorial field by the contrast of light and dark values which destroys the flatness of the canvas plane. For the purists, the flatness of the plane was predominant. The technique called soak-stain, in which the diluted paint was spilled onto an unprimed canvas and allowed to soak into the weave, reinforced the two-dimensionality of the surface by expurging the pictorial field of all suggestions of spatial illusion.

As critic CLement Greenberg notes, in Modernist paintings, the viewer is made aware of the flatness of the pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains. The artists casts off the

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my readers here at FBIS found this sentence confusing.

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depiction of recognizable objects not because in themselves they were objectionable, but because their representation on an inherently flat, two-dimensional plane introduces associations that create the illusion of three-dimensional space. In determining that maintaining the integrity of the flat plane was the predominant goal of the picture, the artists ruthlessly imposed on themselves a very specific set of limiting conditions. In so doing, Modernist art "inadvertently tests all theories about art": the Modernist painting dispensed with factors that long had been thought to be essential to the making and experiencing of art, and yet it manages "to provide the experience of art in all its essentials." The experiencing of Modernist art has been, indeed, partially credited with the revival of interest in Old Masters whose reputations had, over the centuries, fallen by the wayside (such as Ucello, Piero della Francesca, Georges de la Tour), because it revived interest in the purely pictorial aspects of picture-making.

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